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LIGHT PIPE CONTAINING MATERIAL

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/500,124, filed on September 4, 2003.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates to materials that passively detect motion and more particularly to materials that include light pipes.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Motion detection has long been a desirable ability to possess. Numerous kinds of electronic sensors can be used to detect motion and typically include the sensor producing a beam of light (visible or otherwise) that when broken, activates an alarm. However, such sensors are comparatively expensive and require electricity.

[0004] Light pipes generally are transparent and translucent materials that are capable of transmitting light. Light pipes typically use internal reflection to transmit light. They have numerous different uses in the many different technologies including in the telecommunication industry and in the construction industry as decorative, architectural and/or building materials. Light pipes, as the name suggests, pass light from one location to another. For example, one approach has been to employ a light pipe to transmit light from the exterior to the interior of a building or from a central light source to a multitude of telecommunication devices placed remotely from the source.

[0005] There continues to be a need for a simple and cost effective motion detecting device using light pipes, or other devices, particularly ones capable of transmission of light such as by way of internal reflection.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] The present invention relates to an article of manufacture for detecting motion that includes a substrate with a plurality of volumes of material, where each volume is capable of transmitting light from one location on a surface of the substrate to a second location. The present invention also relates to an article of manufacture having a motion detector with a

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substrate with a first surface, and a volume of material contained within the substrate and adapted to transmit light from a first location on the first surface to at least a second location. The present invention also relates to a light distributing material having a light pipe with a first end and a second end, and a matrix formed about the light pipe into which the light pipe is embedded so that the first end is substantially coplanar and flush with a first exposed surface of the matrix, the light pipe extends at least partially through and is surrounded over at least a portion of its length by the matrix and the second end is substantially coplanar with a second exposed surface of the matrix, where the light inputted into a first end of the light pipe is guided along the light pipe and emitted at the second end of the light pipe.

[0007] The present invention also relates to methods of making the article where the methods include creating a refractive index boundary between a material and a substrate to form at least one light pipe contained within the substrate, where the light pipe is capable of transmitting light from a first location on a surface of the substrate to a second location on the surface of the substrate.

[0008] The present invention also relates to methods of transmitting information by transmitting light through a plurality of light pipes in a substrate, where one of the light pipes transmits light from a first location on a surface of the substrate to at least a second location. The method also includes interfering with the transmission of light through the light pipe before the light arrives at the second location. This method may also be used to detect motion.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] In the drawings:

[0010] Fig. 1 shows a perspective view of one embodiment where several light pipes are embedded in a substrate.

[0011] Fig. 2 shows multiple views of another embodiment where the light pipes are cut from a mass of the substrate material, where Fig. 2a shows a perspective view of the device; Fig. 2b shows a top view; Fig. 2c shows a cross-section along line C--C; Fig. 2d shows a cross-section along line D--D; Fig. 2e shows a cross-section along line E--E, while Figs. 2f and 2g show alternate cross-sections along lines C--C and/or D--D.

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[0012] Fig. 3 shows a process of making a motion detecting device in which the sections are cast.

[0013] Fig. 4 shows a perspective view of another embodiment where the light pipes are incorporated into a woven fabric.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0014] The present invention includes materials and methods for passively detecting movement as well as decorative, architectural and building materials and methods of making these materials, using them or both.

[0015] The motion detecting device of the present invention includes at least one light pipe in a substrate, where the light pipe transmits light from one location on a first surface of the substrate to another location on the same surface of the substrate, to another surface of the same substrate, to a location on the surface of another substrate, or any combination thereof. The light pipe transmits light from a point along its length to one of its ends on a surface of the substrate. Preferably, the light pipe transmits light from one of its ends to one of its other ends in manner such that the surfaces are connected by light. The light source of the may be ambient light, from a visible light source, a non-visible light source, or any combination thereof.

[0016] By interfering with the light at one end of the light pipe, that interference is detectable at the other end of the light pipe as a shadow. If the interference is transient then the shadow appears and then disappears, giving an indication of motion. Because the light pipe itself does not need to change position, it essentially passively detects motion.

[0017] With a visible light source, the shadow is detectable by the human eye. With a proper combination of materials, with a non-visible light source, the shadow may also be detectable by the human eye. In other situations, a separate sensor may be suitable for detecting the shadow whether visible or non-visible to the human eye.

[0018] Stated more broadly, the method of detecting motion is a subset of a method of transmitting information. Namely, in detecting motion, the information that an unseen object is approaching is transmitted from one location to another. Thus, the devices of the present invention are suitable for use in a method that includes transmitting information between two

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points. That is, the method includes interfering with light that is capable of being transmitted in a light pipe so as to transmit information, such as an optical signal, by way of the light pipe. Variations of this approach may be employed, such as manipulating the light before, during or after the light enters the light pipe or manipulating the light during or after it exits the light pipe.

[0019] The type and content of the information being transmitted is can be manipulated by controlling the length of time the light is interfered with (e.g. an interference duration of a set interval or pattern of intervals ranging from microseconds, to milliseconds, to less than 1 second, to several seconds or longer), varying one or more patterns of interference (e.g. Morse code or other continuous or intermittent signal transmission), inserting one or more objects or filters into the light path to provide the interference, manually, automatically, remotely, locally controlling the movement of the interfering object or filter, varying the source of the light, varying the intensity of the light, varying the wavelength of the light, varying the number of light pipes that are in use, varying the number of surfaces and locations of surfaces that are connected by light pipes, any combination thereof or otherwise.

[0020] By way of illustration, perhaps the simplest method of interfering with the light is to place an object between one end of the light pipe and the light source. The nature of the object is not critical but the use of certain objects will help define the uses to which the material of the present invention may be put. For example, a computer mouse passing across the surface of the substrate would indicate that the material, at that moment in time, was being used as a mouse pad.

[0021] Other methods of interfering with the light, such as turning off the light source, are also suitable. Also, the interference with the light may be partial or complete. For example, placing a colored but translucent object between the light pipe and the light source may be used to permit only a specified color of light to be transmitted by the light pipe. Other types light filters may also be used to partially interfere with the light such a polarizing gradients, IR filters, UV filters, etc. and combinations thereof.

[0022] In one embodiment of the invention, for the light pipe to transmit light there is a refractive index boundary creating internal reflectance of light within the light pipe, allowing light to be transmitted along at least a portion of the length of the light pipe. The boundary

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can be formed at the interface of the light pipe material and a substrate. Preferably, the refractive index of the light pipe is higher than the refractive index of the substrate. Alternately or additionally, a coating, sheath or other material on the light pipe can be used to create the refractive index boundary. Alternately or additionally, the boundary can be the result of a physical discontinuity in the light pipe/substrate such as an edge, rim, lip, perimeter or border. In this embodiment, the light pipe may be made from the same material as the substrate or at least from a material with the same refractive index as the substrate. Any combination of these variations may also be employed.

[0023] The size and cross-section of the light pipe is limited only by available manufacturing techniques, although typically, the light pipes will have length that is longer than their width, where the length is the distance between the two surfaces connected by the light pipe. The width of the light pipe may be anything from about a micron to about several centimeters. For example, light pipes of about 1 micron, about 5 microns, about 10 microns, about 50 microns, about 100 microns, about 500 microns and about 1000 microns are suitable, as are light pipes of about 2.5 mm, about 5 mm, about 10 mm, about 15 mm, about 20 mm, about 25 mm and about 50 mm. Light pipes are preferably consistent in size over their length, although the aspect may also vary, such that a relatively large light pipe decreases in size over its length or vice versa. The cross-section of the light pipe is preferably circular or rectangular, although any other cross-sections such as stars or hollow tubes are also suitable. Also, light pipes are preferably consistent in cross-section over their length, although this is not necessarily the case, such that a rectangular light pipe morphs into a star cross-section over its length. The transition from one cross-section or size may be gradual or abrupt. In addition, the light pipe may be a film such that it has a width that is substantially larger than its thickness. Further, the use of a film would permit patterns of longitudinal lines in the substrate formed by the light pipes. For example, a sinusoidal line may be formed in the substrate at either or both ends of a light pipe. In addition, several different light pipes of different size, cross-section shape or material may be combined into a larger light pipe.

[0024] The shape of the light pipe within the substrate is limited only by the need to have the light pipes transmit light from one point to another along the length of the light pipe. Generally, U-shaped light pipes (when seen in cross-section) are preferred to transmit light

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from one location on the surface to another location on the same surface. U-shaped light pipes may also be used to transmit light from one surface to a generally parallel surface on the same or another substrate. Other exemplary shapes for light pipes include L-shaped light pipes that would transmit light from one surface to a generally normal surface on the same substrate or another substrate. T-shaped and other branched light pipes may be used to transmit light from one surface to a plurality of locations on surfaces or from a plurality of surfaces to a single location. Also, generally linear light pipes may be used to connect two different surfaces of the same substrate or two otherwise opposed surfaces. Any combination of the above variations is also possible.

[0025] In addition, the light pipes of the present invention may be discontinuous along its length meaning that only portions of the light pipe near its ends need to have the refractive index boundary. In this embodiment, the light being transmitted by the light pipe is initially given direction by the refractive index boundary; however, as the light travels along the length of the light pipe, the refractive index boundary ends, causing the light pipe and the substrate to become one. While some leaking of light into the surrounding substrate will inevitably occur, some light will also travel to other end of the light pipe that has another refractive index boundary. This boundary causes the light to again be directed.

[0026] Though light pipes of limited opacity may be employed in certain instances, typically a preferred light pipe will be made of any transparent or otherwise translucent material. Preferably, the material has percentage transmission of at least about 50%; more preferably at least about 75%; and most preferably at least about 90%. Preferably, the material is at least partially amorphous or more preferably is substantially entirely amorphous glass or a plastic such as acrylates, methacrylates, polycarbonates, PET, polyesters, polyolefins, nylons, fluoropolymers and combinations thereof and combinations of glasses and plastics. The material may be flexible or rigid. The light pipe may be a tube containing a transparent medium including being the same or different as the substrate material which carries it, whether solid, liquid or gas. The tube may be sealed or open such that the ambient air is the transparent medium. Alternately, the light pipe may be formed from one or more films that are spaced from each other, wherein the space is filled with a transparent material, including, optionally, the substrate material.

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[0027] The light pipe material may be luminescent. For example, phosphorescent material may be used such that the light pipe material glows in the dark. Alternately, fluorescent material may be used such the light pipe gives off light in the presence of UV light, IR light or some other non-visible light or electromagnetic energy. The light pipe material may be neat or doped to achieve the desired luminescent quality.

[0028] In addition, the light pipe material may colored or doped with a colorant or other component to achieve a desired lighting effect. For example, one or more doping agents may be employed to alter the index of refraction, the strength of the light pipe material or the percentage transmission of the light pipe. Further, the light pipe may be doped throughout its length or just a portion or portions thereof or it may be doped throughout its cross-section or just a portion or portions thereof.

[0029] Light pipes may also include a coating or sheath (transparent or opaque) designed to protect the light pipe from physical damage (e.g. abrasion) or from chemical attack (e.g. dissolution or infiltration by an undesired agent such as air, oxygen, oil, water, or the like). For example, several light pipes may be combined together into one cable such as a fiber optic cable where one protective sheath surrounds a plurality of light pipes.

[0030] One preferred approach is to employ a light pipe material that is recyclable. Thus the invention also contemplates a step of recycling the light pipe at the end of its useful life.

[0031] The light pipes may be made according to any conventional technique suitable for the light pipe material including casting, molding, drawing, extruding, glass rod forming or any suitable film forming technique.

[0032] As indicated above, the light pipes are preferably carried in a substrate. The substrate may be made of any material that is compatible with the light pipe material. The substrate material or matrix may be a castable or moldable material, a metal, plastic, ceramic, composite, wood or wood substitute, fiber material for creating a fabric or a laminate (woven or non-woven), the same material as the light pipe, or any combination thereof. The resultant substrate may be flexible or rigid, transparent or opaque, or hard or soft to the touch. If transparent, the substrate material may have any of the qualities of the light pipes such as being luminescent, for example phosphorescent or fluorescent. Preferred substrates, such as for use in architectural applications, include concrete, or other matrix materials suitable for

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producing blocks, bricks or tiles, preferably capable of carrying loads, that incorporate at least one light pipe. Other suitable substrates include metals, alloys, plastics, silicones, thermoplastics, thermosets, ceramics, composites, laminates, polyesters, epoxies, and combinations thereof including foams, gelatins and slurries. Suitable fiber materials include natural and synthetic fibers for making clothing, fabrics or other woven or non-woven articles. Fiberglass, wood, fiberboard, other composite materials, and the like are also suitable substrates.

[0033] The surfaces including the ends of the light pipes may include surface features such as mounds, hills, other promontories, valleys, grooves, trenches or other basins. The surface features may be regular patterns, such as a sine wave, or irregular. In addition, the surfaces may be micro- or nano-textured to alter the tactile or optical characteristics of the surface, substrate or light pipe.

[0034] As indicated, one preferred method employs using ambient light as a light source for the light pipe. In addition to use with ambient light, the materials of the present invention may be combined with light sources. The light sources may provide visible, UV, IR or other frequencies of electromagnetic energy. The light sources may be point sources that illuminate only a portion of the substrate or that illuminate only the individual light pipes or broad sources that illuminate the environment generally where the device is placed. The light source may be transient, modulated or stable in its illumination and may utilize a pattern of illumination such as areas of illumination alternating with areas of shadow. The source may be periodic in its illumination or it may be irregular. The light source may stationary, mobile, at rest or in motion. Plural light sources may also be utilized. In one embodiment, the motion detecting device and the light source are packaged together.

[0035] The general method of manufacturing the motion detecting devices of the present invention includes creating a refractive index boundary between a transparent material and a substrate to form a light transmission path akin to a light pipe within the substrate. The creation of the refractive index boundary may be made by insert molding, injection molding, compression molding, rotational molding, casting, sintering, foam infiltration, impregnation with liquid, selective curing, weaving, laminating, and any combination thereof.

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[0036] In one preferred method, the refractive index boundary may be made by casting an uncured substrate material with a first refractive index around a transparent material that has a second refractive index. This casting includes both casting the substrate around a pre-formed network of light pipes and embedding light pipes in as of yet uncured mass of substrate. In another preferred method, the refractive index boundary may be made by cutting a light pipe into a mass of transparent material thus making a boundary between the light pipe and the remainder of the mass of transparent material, i.e. the substrate. In another preferred method, the refractive index boundary may be made by incorporating a light pipe into a fabric, whether woven or non-woven of other fibers or of other light pipes. The light pipes may also be incorporated into laminates.

[0037] Turning now, in particular, to the accompanying drawings for further illustration, shown in Fig. 1, one embodiment of the motion detecting device 10 may include several light pipes 12, 14, 16 and 18 of a transparent material and a round cross section embedded in a substrate 20. Light pipe 18 is shown in cross-section down its length and generally has a U-shape that connects a first location 22 on a first surface 24 of the substrate 20 to a second location 26 on the same surface. Light pipe 14 is shown in cross-section and generally has an L-shape that connects a location 28 on the first surface 24 of the substrate with another location on a second surface of the substrate. Light pipe 16 is shown in cross-section and generally has an S-shape that connects two opposing surfaces of the substrate. As can be seen, the light pipes may overlap each other or be woven together.

[0038] The embodiment shown in Fig. 1 may be made by forming a mold in the desired shape, e.g. a floor tile, for the motion detecting device, casting the substrate material into the mold and subsequently placing the light pipes in the as yet uncured substrate material. The substrate material is appropriately cured or allowed to cure on its own, provided that any applied cure condition do not unduly adversely effect the light pipes. Alternately, the substrate may be cast about pre-placed light pipes. Such a casting method may be used to pre-fabricate tiles or to cast the tiles in place. In this method, one preferred embodiment, the substrate material expands on curing so as to provide a pre-stressed substrate that has increased strength compared to an un-stressed substrate.

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[0039] As shown in Fig. 2, in another embodiment, the motion detecting device 100 includes light pipes 102 that are of the same material as the substrate 104. The device is formed from a plurality of sections 106 of substrate connected together where each section contains a plurality of light pipes 102. The light pipes of the device, thus, generally run parallel to one another. Exemplary sections of the device 100 are shown in Figs. 2c and 2d. In this embodiment, the light pipes are formed by cutting into a transparent material. The cuts form a refractive index boundary between the portions of transparent material separated by the cut. Through cuts, partial cuts or combinations thereof may be used to form a section with one or more layers of light pipes in the section. The section shown in Fig. 2c has two layers of light pipes made by two separate partial thickness cuts, while Fig. 2d has a single layers of light pipes made with through cuts. As can be seen, preferably, when through cuts are used, a portion 108 of the transparent material is not cut, preferably near the edge of the transparent material. By not cutting through along the entire length of the light pipe, a connection point is formed so that all the light pipes of the section are held together. These uncut portions also provide physical strength to the motion detecting device. The uncut portion may also help to provide a relatively smooth surface to the device. In addition, to the U-shaped light pipes seen in Figs. 2c and 2d, linear light pipes 110 and L-shaped light pipes 112 may be used, as seen in Figs. 2e and 2f. Further, the uncut portion 108 need not be at the surface, but may be in the interior.

[0040] A variety of known cutting devices and techniques may be used to form the light pipes within the substrate. For example, a computer controlled cutting machine such as CNC using a laser is preferable because of its precision, ease of use and minimal loss of material due to waste. Water jet cutters, routers, grinders and cutters with blades, manually controlled cutting machines, and combinations thereof or the like may also be suitable. In addition, chemical methods may be used such as etching or photo methods such as photolithography.

[0041] A variety of known devices and techniques may be used to fasten together the various sections of the substrate. For example, an adhesive may be used, as can mechanical fasteners such as nuts-and-bolts, screws, nails, snap-fit connectors, etc. Also, the various sections may be held together in a frame or by a clamp, such that force keeps the sections together as a unit.

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[0042] In another embodiment similar to the one shown in Fig. 2, the sections of the substrate may be cast. As seen in Fig. 3, a mold 200 of the section is prepared and into which the casting material of the light pipe is introduced. The casting material may be any suitable castable transparent material including any of the transparent materials discussed above. After curing, the light pipe containing section 202 is removed from the mold 200. Preferably the mold is reusable, though it may be disposable. The cast section may be trimmed or post treated as necessary before being connected together with other sections to form the motion detecting device 204. Casting may be preferable to other forms of manufacture because it allows for rapid, repetitive production of sections.

[0043] In another embodiment, as shown in Fig. 4, the motion detecting device 300 may include light pipes 302 that are integrated into a substrate of fibers 304. The light pipes are shown as woven with other fibers into a fabric; however, the light pipes may be incorporated with other fibers into a non-woven fabric or into a laminate, e.g. fiberglass.

[0044] The motion detecting device of the present invention has numerous uses as providing a visual cue of impending danger and as a safety device. That is, the device indicates, alerts or warns of an impending danger. In one embodiment, the light pipes connect two walls that meet at a corner, for example, where two hallways come together. As a person comes down one hallway, the person block the light from entering the light pipe, thus transmitting their shadow to the other end of the light pipe visible on the other hallway. This would alert a person in the second hallway to the on coming person in the first hallway. This foreknowledge would help prevent a collision or at least keep the people from being startled. Likewise, the same type of device could be used to alert drivers of vehicles that are around blind curves or behind hills or in depressions in the roadway. In this embodiment, the motion detecting device is entirely passive, relying the person or vehicle to block ambient light to provide the indication of movement. In another embodiment, vehicle headlights illuminate one end of the light pipe to provide the alert of on coming traffic.

[0045] In another embodiment, light pipes could be embedded in the road way as lane markers. At night, as car highlights hit upon the end of the light near the vehicle, the end of the light pipe far from the vehicle would illuminate, thus providing the driver with a visual cue as to the path of the road even beyond that distance illuminated by the headlights.

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[0046] The materials of the present invention may also be used in buildings as pre-fabricated wall, ceiling and flooring tiles, made-in-place tiles, other floor coverings, façade panels, pavers, bricks, siding, roofing, glass and concrete blocks, furniture panels, cabinetry panels, countertops, fabrics, rugs, carpets, wall coverings, room partitions, furniture, upholstery or window treatments (e.g. Venetian blinds). These materials may provide either or both a utility and decorative function to the article into which they are incorporated. For example, these materials may be used to include decorative designs, patterns or graphics integrated into the articles. In addition, these materials may be used in lighting fixtures.

[0047] As an example of a use of the invention as an architectural material, the devices may be incorporated into the wall, floor or ceiling of an entranceway. As flooring tiles, the devices may be cast-in-place to create a surface that is suitable for daily use. As wall coverings, the devices may be fabric that is hung like tapestries or the devices may be tiles secured to an underlying surface or structure. As ceiling tiles, the devices may be suspended like a drop ceiling or secured to an underlying surface or structure. With additional light sources such as lamps or windows, the entranceway may provide an aesthetically appealing opening the office, building or residence.

[0048] These materials may also be used to provide natural light to the interior of buildings, garages, underpasses, tunnels, etc. in order to reduce costs associated with lighting these locations.

[0049] In other embodiments, the materials of the present invention may be used in signage such as pedestrian, vehicle or bicycle activated billboards and signage located in buildings, on buildings, in or on the roadway or sidewalk or located on freestanding supports. The signage may be useful as temporary or permanent displays. Roadway signage and other safety implementations are particularly suitable uses for these materials because the human peripheral vision is quite sensitive to movement. In addition, these materials could be incorporated into concrete barriers or bridge abutments.

[0050] Other safety related uses include use on stairs, sidewalks, curbs, or floors as warnings of approaching people or objects or as warnings of changing levels. These materials may also be used around corners as warning of approaching people or objects or used as parking guides for automobiles in garages.

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[0051] These materials may be incorporated into business cards, or other novelty items that are given away as advertisements. Indeed, these materials may be incorporated into any item which currently serves as a platform for advertising or decorative art work.

[0052] Moreover, the present materials may be incorporated in to credit cards as a decorative feature or a functionality related to the insuring the authorized use of the credit card. For example, a plurality of light pipes can be individualized and embedded into the card with a particular ‘signature’ that can be scanned and/or read by a sensor.

[0053] The present materials are suitable for water related uses such as in fountains, aquariums, fish tanks, tubs, pools (above ground and in ground), spas and/or Jacuzzis because they reduce dangers associated with using electricity in or near water. The materials may be suitable for use in dinnerware, glassware and/or silverware. The present materials may be used as containers or cases for other objects such as retail product containers and computer cases. Fabrics incorporating these materials may be made to any of the known uses for fabrics including as clothing.

[0054] One particularly suitable use for the present materials is in mouse pads for optical mice.

[0055] It will be further appreciated that functions or structures of a plurality of components or steps may be combined into a single component or step, or the functions or structures of one step or component may be split among plural steps or components. The present invention contemplates all of these combinations. Unless stated otherwise, dimensions and geometries of the various structures depicted herein are not intended to be restrictive of the invention, and other dimensions or geometries are possible. Plural structural components or steps can be provided by a single integrated structure or step. Alternatively, a single integrated structure or step might be divided into separate plural components or steps. In addition, while a feature of the present invention may have been described in the context of only one of the illustrated embodiments, such feature may be combined with one or more other features of other embodiments, for any given application. It will also be appreciated from the above that the fabrication of the unique structures herein and the operation thereof also constitute methods in accordance with the present invention.

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[0056] The explanations and illustrations presented herein are intended to acquaint others skilled in the art with the invention, its principles, and its practical application. Those skilled in the art may adapt and apply the invention in its numerous forms, as may be best suited to the requirements of a particular use. Accordingly, the specific embodiments of the present invention as set forth are not intended as being exhaustive or limiting of the invention. The scope of the invention should, therefore, be determined not with reference to the above description, but should instead be determined with reference to the appended claims, along with the full scope of equivalents to which such claims are entitled. The disclosures of all articles and references, including patent applications and publications, are incorporated by reference for all purposes.